

EXHIBITION OF EUROPEAN
ARMS AND ARMOR FROM THE
JOHN W. HIGGINS COLLECTION

THROUGH FEBRUARY
AND MARCH

1928

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM
WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS



SUIT OF JOUSTING ARMOR
FRENCH, ABOUT 1570-1590

John W. Higgins Collection

NOTES ON THE COLLECTION

A fine suit of armor is a work of art. It is well adapted to its purpose, constructed with superb technique from metal which is strong, light, and beautiful, and its general proportions follow those of the slender, active human figure which it is designed to protect. In addition, armor makes a strong appeal to the imagination. With no great effort we can see a veteran knight, the hero of many tournaments, behind a suit such as the one illustrated, with its closed helmet, gauntlets, and sollerets. It brings up before us a whole company of knights and heroes—Achilles with his shield, Perseus's helmet of invisibility, the Knights of the Round Table, Alexander, Maximilian, Charles V, all the great conquerors up to the seventeenth century, who stride through our histories clad in suits of armor.

In the development of arms and armor through the centuries two contestants, defense and offense, strive to hold first place. Defensive armor is strengthened to keep abreast of improvements in offensive arms, and these, in turn, become more deadly as suits of mail grow stronger and heavier. At least, that was the case up to the time when fire-arms were first employed and for a considerable time thereafter. In the seventeenth century it was finally admitted that no armor was strong in the face of a cannon. It was retired to a dignified place in ceremonial functions, its usefulness gone.

The advantages of heavy suits of plate armor were not then equal to their disadvantages. Helmets alone often weighed as much as twenty pounds, whole suits a hundred or more. Many a knight was killed by the weight of his accoutrements when he fell from his horse. Some suffocated in their ill-ventilated helmets. In warm weather or in active combat the heat confined within the metal and the padded undergarments was almost unbearable. Shakespeare writes of "rich armour worn in heat of day which scalds with safety." As fire-arms developed the game of scalding with safety was no longer worth the candle.

Some of the armor which we see was meant for tournaments, some for actual battles. Tournaments were no idle passtime;

they were a means of keeping in training for war in times of peace,—and a rigorous training too. It was only because boys and men literally grew up in armor in those days that they were able to endure it. Most of the suits which we see in museums and private collections today are too small for a full-grown man of our own time. There are various explanations for this. Possibly the best preserved suits are those made for young men who soon outgrew them, possibly the heat and strenuous exercise of battle kept the warriors trained down to very slender proportions, and possibly—even probably—men of Mediæval and Renaissance times were about the size of the sixteen or seventeen year old youths of today.

Only the briefest survey of the development of armor can be given here, but further information may be gained from the books and photographs reserved for study in the small gallery adjoining the Renaissance Room. There one may see also an Etruscan sepulchral chest on the base of which are Greek soldiers wearing a very early type of armor. The chief defense of these agile warriors was a large round shield and the metal employed for their armor was probably bronze. Roman soldiers wore headplates, breastplates, and backplates of iron,—a very unattractive but, if one judge by the extent of Rome's conquests, a very efficient type. With the breaking down of the Roman empire and the barbarian invasions, shirts of stout leather covered with overlapping scales of metal came into use. Battle-axes were the chief weapons of these tribes which swept down from the north. Then in the tenth century or thereabouts chain mail was introduced, probably from the Orient. It is a prominent feature of the eleventh century armor shown in the famous Bayeux embroidery and it is also represented in one of the large thirteenth century Italian frescoes in the Museum. The Crusaders crossed Europe in it and not until about 1300 did it become secondary to plate armor as a defense. Its lightness and coolness account in large measure for its popularity.

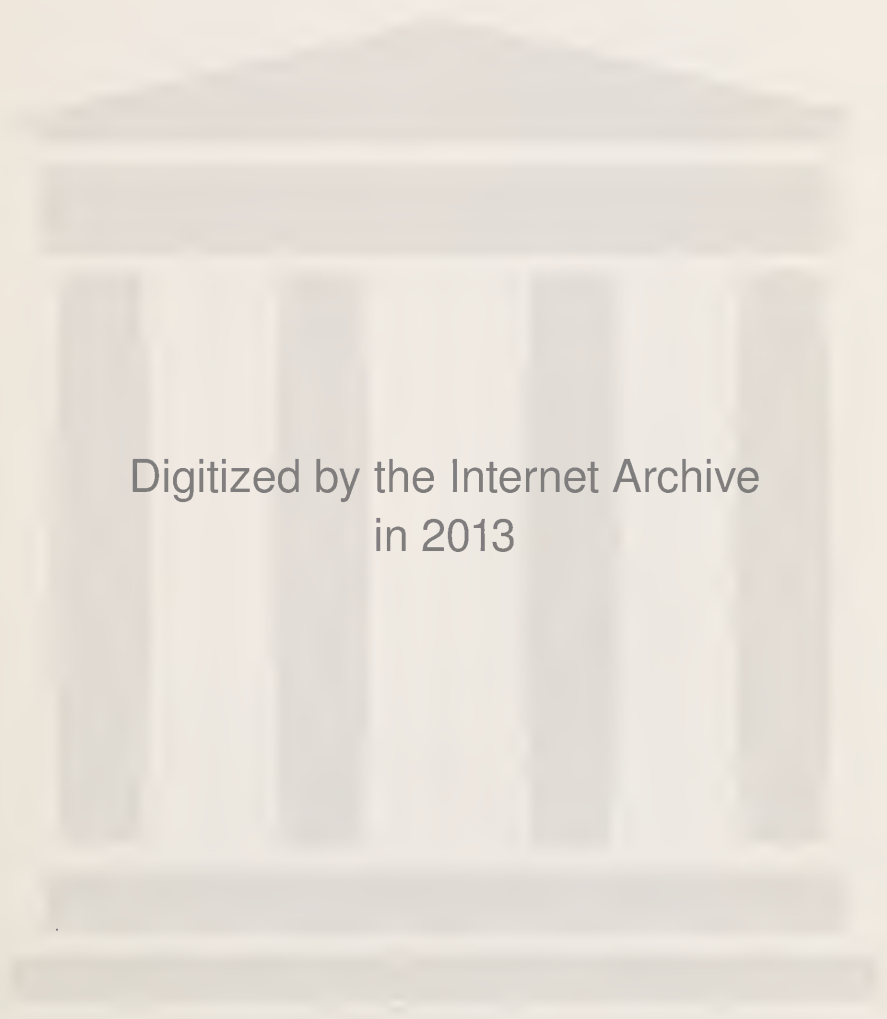
In all the history of armor the Gothic period, particularly the late fifteenth century, stands supreme. For beauty of line, suitability to function, simplicity, and style nothing can equal a fine suit of plate armor, supplemented by chain, of this period. This is equally true whether we consider it from the point of view of the soldier or of the æsthete.

In the sixteenth century, the time of most of the pieces in the present collection, armor retained much of its beauty of form and took on its finest surface decoration. Several of the suits shown—the fluted Maximilian one and the early German and French ones—retain much of the vigor of the great period. The elaborate Spanish and Italian examples, with their graceful lines and their ornament of fire gilt, etching, and embossing, suggest that they were more of a luxury than a necessity. Possibly the finest of these in quality is the “Pembroke” half-armor. In Antonio Moro’s *Knight of Malta* the sitter wears a suit which is almost identical with this one. There, however, the helmet is of the cabasset type and the cuishes are omitted. The handsome gilded and etched Italian suit, with its design of Medusa heads, dolphins, and tridents, and its somewhat broader contours, suggests the end of the century. In all of these examples the helmets are of the armet type, in which the weight rests on the shoulders. A comparison of these with the later hat-like morions is of interest.

Seventeenth century armor may be seen to advantage in the detailed portraits of Justus Susterman (See photographs). In the eighteenth century armor became obsolete and a last survival, or what seemed then a last survival, of the armorer’s craft was a small gorget plate hung around the neck. Such a plate may be seen on early portraits of George Washington. Then a century and a half later came the Great War, when every conceivable device was needed to withstand scientific methods of destruction. Poison gas was met by the gas-mask and the armored tank developed as the monster of that race of crustaceous fighters which for centuries has been arming itself against its fellow men.

Whatever the future of war, whatever its past, it has left us in the products of the armorer’s craft something of great beauty. The Museum is indebted to Mr. John W. Higgins for his generosity in lending a large part of his collection. It has been assembled from armor gathered together by the late George Jay Gould and Edmund C. Converse, and several of the pieces formerly belonged to Sir Guy Francis Laking, late Keeper of the King’s Armory; the Right Hon. the Earl of Pembroke, and Sir Joseph Duveen.

E. S. S.



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